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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the acculturation experiences of new immigrants in their cultural transformation from Vietnamese to Vietnamese American. Three objectives guided the research effort: (1) to investigate the cultural transformation of new immigrants through an ethnographic study of a Vietnamese Boy Scout troop; (2) to discover how the beliefs and practices of Vietnamese refugee families are reflected in school and work performance; and (3) to explore how the Vietnamese cultural perspective shapes individual behavior and implications for Vietnamese Americans. Methodology included participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. Ethnographic documents included social services information on refugees, magazines and newsletters, and the "Boy Scout Handbook." Findings discuss how the family system was the root of society in ancient Vietnam; behavior was guided by Confucian principles. In a situationally oriented culture like the Vietnamese, major life decisions are considered in a group context. Initially, the family orientation of new immigrants provides a cushion to culture shock both as a source of resources and affiliation needs. Eventually, the rugged individualism of American culture poses ethical dilemmas for those attempting to adapt to the host country. Conflicts between family and self are particularly poignant for Vietnamese American youngsters attempting to cope with both cultures. The study concludes that the road to acculturation begins with understanding the underlying assumptions of each society and then seeking balance, a characteristic valued by both. (Contains 13 references.) (BT)

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## Two Cinderellas, Two Worldviews: Dilemmas for Vietnamese Americans.

by Ann D. Newman

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## **TWO CINDERELLAS, TWO WORLDVIEWS: Dilemmas for Vietnamese Americans**

The universally popular story of Cinderella offers a springboard for discussion about the alternative viewpoints of Vietnamese and Americans. In the American version, Cinderella's misfortunes are reversed through the magical powers of a fairy godmother. A golden god also intercedes for Tam, a victim of her sister's chicanery, but the god is not the sole source of power in the Vietnamese story. Magical assistance is provided by a yellow fish, a rooster, and a flock of birds so that power and credit are both shared and divided. This subtle distinction highlights differences in two cultural perspectives, one emphasizing the individual and the other valuing the group.

When the dislocation of ethnic migration occurs, the "givens" of one intersubjective universe are challenged by those of a different reality. Reactions of confusion, denial and anxiety are common. Ultimately, successful adjustment to the "new" reality requires resolution of cognitive dissonance and the forging of an identity that reflects either the synthesis of opposing value sets, or at least, behavioral patterns that are not wildly discordant in either native or host cultures. This is the condition facing Vietnamese refugees in America.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of this study was to explore the acculturation experiences of new immigrants in their cultural transformation from

Vietnamese to Vietnamese American. Although this paper will focus on the final one, three objectives guided the full research effort:

1. To investigate the cultural transformation of new immigrants through an ethnographic study of a Vietnamese Boy Scout troop.
2. To discover how the beliefs and practices of Vietnamese refugee families are reflected in school and work performance.
3. To explore how the Vietnamese cultural perspective shapes individual behavior and to examine implications for Vietnamese Americans.

### METHODOLOGY

Methodology for this holistic ethnography included participant observation, interviewing and document analysis, techniques that permitted collecting data on the "home ground" of informants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Utilizing these methods also gave me, a European American, the opportunity for frequent, informal interaction in the neighborhoods and homes of Vietnamese respondents.

Fieldwork spanned a two year period during which participant observation brought me from the fringes of the refugee community into their homes and lives. From a volunteer with Catholic Social Services (CSS), I became Assistant Scoutmaster of a Vietnamese Boy Scout troop in weekly contact with children ages 11-14. As an informal English language tutor for a subset of Troop 241, I held weekly sessions in the apartment of one family for 9 months. My employment in another sector of the Hampton school district gave me occasional access to the schools and classrooms of students from Kimberly Heights Apartments, the primary research site. Participant

observation extended to Vietnamese homes and local Vietnamese activities.

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the investigation. Of these, 19 were with members of 4 Vietnamese families and utilized the translation services of Scoutmaster and key informant, Hai Tran. Alone, I interviewed 3 school principals, 4 representatives of Boy Scouts of America (BSA), and 4 Vietnamese community members.

Ethnographic documents utilized in the course of the study included CSS information on refugees, BSA training materials, magazines and newsletters, and the Boy Scout Handbook. Additional documents included student work in the language class and photographs documenting special events.

Interviews triangulated findings and led to new inquiries. My role as participant and observer enabled me to develop both emic and etic perspectives of new immigrants struggling to adapt to their host culture.

## FINDINGS

According to Geertz (1973), what distinguishes one cultural system from another is the distinctive "tone, character and quality" of a people's ethos. On material, behavioral and ideological levels, a cultural system reflects and is a reflection of "the picture [people have] of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order" (p. 127). How people in any culture act, what they do, what they say depends on what they

believe. In a word, then, a cultural system is derivative of a people's "worldview" (P. 127).

The internal pictures of reality or worldview are vastly different for Vietnamese and Americans. These contrasting social constructions are the source of what is termed "culture shock."

When people experience what is called "culture shock" on going from one society to another . . . it is probably not the differences in physical landscape, climate, religion, dress, or even food which bring about the strongest sense of confusion. More often, it is in the assumptions underlying everyday life, shared by members of a society by virtue of constant interaction from birth, assumptions which are so much a part of the culture that they are not even consciously held. (Watson, 1974, p. 29, cited in Erickson & Mohatt, 1982, p. 136).

According to Adler, "Americans perceive themselves as culture free . . . They view culture as something foreigners have" (1975, cited in Woodruff, 1989, p. 2). Yet both Americans and Vietnamese operate "unconsciously" from underlying assumptions that shape their everyday thoughts and actions.

Chinese American scholar, Hsu (1963) explains that "For the Chinese, his family and its direct and widest extension, the clan, are the beginning and end of his human universe. He can find in that kinship group all that is meaningful in his relationships with his fellowmen. On the other hand, the American's centrifugal outlook, linked to his individual-centered cultural orientation . . . compels him to seek his social needs outside the family" (1963, p. 234-5).

The family system was the root of society both in ancient China and in ancient Vietnam. Behavior was guided by the Confucian

principle of *ming-fen*. *Ming* means name and *fen* means duty. One's *ming* or name defined social relationships, determined their corresponding duties, and established behavior patterns for the individual. After two thousand years, the underlying tenets of Confucianism still guide Vietnamese thought and action (Nguyen, 1967).

Children were taught *lieu* (filial piety), to respect, obey and honor their parents. The moral debt they owed parents was so immense as to be unpayable. It extended beyond appreciation for parental love and care in childrearing to encompass gratitude for their very bodies, skin, breath and life. Recompense was made by returned care and nurturance of parents in old age and their veneration after death. Nurturance, dependence and obligation created a unit designed to ensure personal security and social harmony. (Hsu, 1981, 1983, 1985; Jamieson, 1995).

In a situationally-oriented culture like the Vietnamese, major life decisions are considered in a group context. The strivings of the individual are subordinate to the welfare of the family, particularly parents. Initially, the family orientation of new immigrants provides a cushion to culture shock both as a source of resources and affiliation needs. Eventually, the rugged individualism of American culture poses ethical dilemmas for those attempting to adapt to the host country.

#### Shared Resources

Although they entered the United States with few dollars, the pooling of financial resources benefited newcomers. Most Kimberly

Heights families moved from their low income, inner city neighborhood into homes purchased in the suburbs of nearby counties within 3 or 4 years. One informant had difficulty finding work in this sprawling city because he lacked a car; a distant relative loaned him the money. In Vietnam, where public education was less available, and sometimes in America, family members combined meager funds so that one child could go to college with the expectation that he or she would share improved earning power with others.

Vietnamese concepts of property and space also contrast with American notions. My initial assumption that the tight quarters (2 adults and 3 or 4 children in a 2-bedroom apartment) indicated scant money for rent was only partially correct. Hsu (1981) noted that with the exception of opposite sexes who are not spouses, "privacy hardly exists at all" (p. 78). Children may share the same chambers with parents and each may use the other's possessions with impunity. There are fewer doors and personal spaces "for they consider all within the four walls as being one body" (p. 79). A child would not be scolded for taking another's property (even a parent's), but for losing or damaging it. "Keep your hands to yourself" and "respect others' belongings" were American constructs I had taken for granted.

Even wedding customs may be viewed as an expression of group membership. First, there is little separation of the guests from the wedding party as in the staging of an American wedding. I was startled to be invited into the bedroom of the bride-to-be as the hairdresser put the finishing touches on her traditional hairstyle.



The typical wedding gift is money, placed in an envelope with a card or note expressing the good wishes of the giver, and collected at the wedding dinner. Thus, individual money becomes part of the total sum available to the young couple to start a business, begin a family, or some other venture which, indirectly, is shared by all donors. This contrasts with the non-monetary American gift by which the guest seeks to express both his individuality and that of the recipients.

Despite the obvious advantages of joint effort, submission to the group has disadvantages, even in Vietnam. A young man in his 20's reported that for 3 years his father "begged" for permission to move and was often "yelled at" before he was allowed to leave home with his new wife. And Sanh, a Kimberly Heights parent, enjoyed her release from family in Vietnam where "always the relatives concerned about the relatives, but here I can live without attention from anybody."

The conflicts between family and self are particularly poignant for Vietnamese American youngsters attempting to cope with both cultures. Starting over requires new immigrants who were middle class in their own country to live in low income, inner city neighborhoods where schools may have marginal academic programs. Dien, a high school student, wanted to transfer to a school with a more challenging curriculum. Even though the school system would provide transportation, his father objected because he "did not know where that school was," and he wanted his son "closer to home." Tam was eagerly anticipating a magnet school program when

his family moved to another location. No apparent efforts were made to accommodate the interests of this very bright 9th grader. Even more surprising was the lament of a college-educated woman in her 30's. Her parents, early arrivals from Vietnam, were established professionals in both Vietnamese and American communities. They would not, however, allow their daughter to leave home to attend the college of her choice, Harvard. Individual striving and family obligation pose never-ending dilemmas for Vietnamese American youth.

More tragic are cases within marginally functioning families whose internal dynamics cannot withstand cultural transition. In Vietnam, the extended family and social context would bolster the edicts of weak parents. And physical discipline could curb an unruly fourteen year old. Here, without an extended family, the temptations of the street left Quang's parents helpless, fearful of child abuse charges, and without the voices of the community to sanction the youngster.

#### Affiliation and Support

As already indicated, Confucian principles held that all that was meaningful in relationships could be found within the extended family or clan. Besides a child-rearing unit, the clan served as work unit, banker, day care center, mini-temple, hospital and mortician. The closest American counterpart seems to be the large families of pioneer days. Now, severed from blood relatives, tenuous ties become stronger so that the concept of "clan" may include neighbors from the same Vietnamese town, distant relatives

or even church members. For recent arrivals, looking within the family for affiliation and support can be reassuring. After 5 to 10 years, the pull for developing relationships in school and work arenas that transcend the family presents a never-ending challenge for teens and young adults.

Parents, fearful that their already diminished family unit will be torn apart, strive to keep their children nearby. Their comments reveal a topographical look at American behavior which misses the underlying assumptions of thought and action. For example, respondents believed that American children "never ask the opinion of their parents;" "they got to get out after 18 years old;" and "leaving home at 18 means the relationship between children and the parents [is] not very close."

#### Communication Patterns

What newcomers could not know is that within the group-self dichotomy are also vast differences in communication patterns. Vietnamese society is based on hierarchy.

The ideal role model, provided by school and family and folklore, is one of compliance with the wishes of superordinate figures in a social hierarchy: child to parents, younger brother to older brother, and wife to husband. (Jamieson, 1995, p. 17)

Within the family, role-driven behavior dictates interactions among family members. Love and affection are displayed, but always with dignity and respect towards those higher in authority. Thus, in all my comings and goings to Kimberly Heights over a two-year period, I never saw one adult engaged in any "play" activities with

children. To do so would signal loss of respect and "people would look with strange eyes."

More significant are differences in talk. Children do not routinely venture conversation about their daily happenings. To say they "do not speak unless spoken to" is too extreme, but many thoughts and feelings are not spoken. A Vietnamese father would be taken aback if his 10 year old daughter came crying to him with reasons why her feelings were hurt because of something one friend said to another on the playground. Even with mothers, emotional restraint, role distance and respect limit personal revelations.

Role distinctions also restrict what parents tell children. The realities of work are considered a topic too "harsh" for children. Not only is talk about the job not "brought home," but also children as old as 14 may not know where their parents work, or they may know the name of the company but not what is done there.

American children, on the other hand, accompany parents to the workplace on occasion and have general knowledge about the nature of the work. Children mentally "try on" various jobs and are asked as early as kindergarten "what they would like to do when they grow up." Decisions about career choice typically occur toward the end of high school for Vietnamese youngsters with parents either dictating or steering the future direction.

While Vietnamese relationships are vertical, communication patterns are horizontal. Spontaneous sharing of thoughts and feelings tend to occur among same-sex siblings or friends. In

American families, talk is vertical, especially as children become older. Some would challenge this freedom of expression as too permissive and eroding of parental authority. True or not, the cultural ideal values a relationship of parents and adult children as "friends."

### CONCLUSIONS

Americans are more family centered than Vietnamese perceive. Children (even adult children) in American families do ask parents for advice and family relationships may be very close. Closeness is not occasioned by physical proximity but by the intimacy of conversation that shrinks geographical distances. Children are not forced to "get out," but are encouraged and even prepared for increasing self-sufficiency by societal norms. Choices of friends, extra-curricular activities, school courses, and summer jobs are less important than the permission to make these choices. Managing small amounts of money and considering different careers offers further preparation for self-reliance.

Within the context of rugged individualism, children are encouraged to "leave the nest" and "try their wings." This does not mean that families are broken; children are simply discovering their full potential. To Americans, a life is never fully lived if its potential is crippled. Each bud deserves the right to open, and parents may sacrifice to assure that right.

Because one society stresses filial piety and the other, self-discovery, what is considered selfish varies in each group. For example, American parents who stand in the way of a child's

development are considered "selfish." In contrast, Vietnamese children who place their needs above those of parents are deemed "selfish."

From an anthropological--or even cosmological--perspective, there is no greater moral right in either position. Instead, there is a match, a fit, between the moral context of the society and the behavior of its members. Emigration destroys that match and leaves the newcomer floundering.

How does one reconcile an independently powerful fairy godmother with cultural edicts that prize shared resources and mutual support as seen in the magical group of god, fish, rooster, and birds? The road to acculturation begins with understanding the underlying assumptions of each society and then seeking balance, a characteristic valued by both. It ends with flexibility that allows both Vietnamese and Americans to see value in the other's viewpoint. Only by cherishing Cinderella in her different forms can both groups hope to live together "happily ever after."

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